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NOTES ON GRAVE-STONE INSCRIPTION AND SCULPTURE.

By Chas. J. Maynard and Winnifred L. Green.

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C. J. Maynard West Newton Mass.

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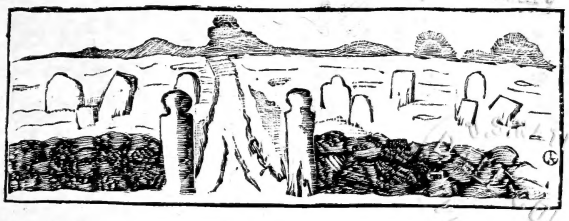

SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM
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NOTES ON GRAVE-STONE INSCRIPTION AND SCULPTURE.

BY CHAS. J. MAYNARD AND WINNIFRED L. GREEN.

Rather than that gray king whose name
a ghost
Streams like a cloud, man-shaped from
mountain peak,
And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still.

Tennyson. To the Queen.

Looking backward into the dim past we are forcefully impressed with the idea that it has long been the desire of man to perpetuate his memory.

Such a desire most obviously originated in a wish to remain longer in some form

among his fellow men than that great concluder of personal human schemes, death, would allow.

This longing we find evidenced in pyramid, in comlech or cairn, in barrow or burial mound, and in monument; all indicative of an ardent endeavor on the part of the individuals, by whose desire they were erected, to stretch a hand through the centuries and retain a hold upon mundane affairs.

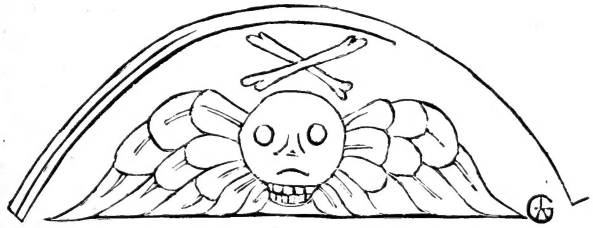
As these sepulchral monuments of the past are undoubtedly closely connected with the history of the peoples or individuals by whom they were constructed, much attention has been given to them by historians who recognize their importance as way stones which in a measure mark the progress of civalization through the ages.

While these more permanent monuments have attracted considerable attention also as being expressive of the status of art and very largely of the religious ideas of the times when they came into existence, of very little less importance, as expressing sim-

ilar ideas, are the simple grave-stones which mark the last resting places of humble individuals many of whom were "to fame unknown". Indeed these often rough stones,

"With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked"

Fig. 20.



Rutland, Mass. 1775.

not only teach us much of the thoughts and feelings of those over whose graves they stand, but also reflect, in a great measure, the conditions under which our forefathers lived.

New England, one of the earliest permanently settled sections in the United States, offers peculiar opportunities for the study of old grave-stones, especially of those bearing dates in the seventeenth and eighteenth cen-

turies and the earlier portion of the nineteenth century.

As many of the names on stones of these dates are of old families, a large number of which were original settlers, the inscriptions and sculptures are well worthy of study.

As already mentioned in a previous article, (see RECORDS, Vol. VII, pages 54-68.) some of the oldest stones, especially those composed of sandstone and marble, are being eroded by the elements and the work of the chisel obliterated. Others are so covered with lichens that their records cannot be read, and no Old Mortality comes with pious hand to remove these plants. Many of the stones, being without bases upon which to stand, are sinking into the ground. Although in a few old grave yards they are occasionally reset, this is not generally done and in some cases it is necessary to remove a portion of the surrounding soil in order to read the inscriptions.

Besides all this some of the old cemeteries are being abandoned as places of inter-

ment and are consequently much neglected. Visits to several of these burying grounds since the previous article was written have convinced us of the urgent necessity of preserving these valuable records of an essential portion of the history of our country.

Fig. 21.

Rutland, Mass. 1777.

The notes here given are necessarily somewhat fragmentary and disconnected and are printed with the idea of awakening an interest in the subject, but in a larger work which we have in hand we shall treat the

matter much more systematically and exhaustively.

A usual device placed on head-stones during the seventeenth and early portion of the eighteenth centuries was the Angel of Death. This appeared in various forms. A common one was a winged skull surmounted by an hour-glass which was often much conventionalized, fig. 3, page 56; or may be crowned, fig. 5, page 59. The crown may be conventionalized, fig 7, page 61; or is sometimes replaced by cross-bones, fig 20. A rather singular departure from the usual form was found by Mrs. Nellie A. Clapp at Duxbury, Mass., where the skull was not only crowned by a conventionalized hour-glass, but this had a pair of cross-bones on each side of it; the entire combination being quite unique.

Fig. 22.

In whatever guise this figure appears it is always a personification of the destroyer of the human race. Like the skeleton exhibited at ancient Roman feasts it is intended as a warning of the certainty of death.

A glance at the history of the times when this emblem was used shows us that Death was a very near neighbor of the New England colonist, and frequently came in the hours of darkness preceded by the dreaded war-whoop of the relentless savage. For over a hundred years the tomahawk and scalping knife were the terror of our frontiersman and his family. With this constant probability of meeting Death face to face any warning would appear quite unnecessary.

It is quite possible that the gloomy religious ideas of the day may have had much to do with the appearance of this Angel of Death on head-stones. Not only were the woodlands peopled by Indians, but in the belief of all men these same surrounding shades were inhabited by the arch-fiend Satan himself and by whole legions of his imps.

These powers of darkness were always on the alert and never let an opportunity escape them for tormenting human beings.

Fig. 23.

Rutland, Mass. 1760.

These matters were very real to our forefathers. The best educated among them firmly believed in an ever-present personal devil and warnings were given from every pulpit in the land to beware of him and his machinations.

In fact the Indians themselves were considered by many as emissaries of the evil one, and we find as high an authority as the Rev. Cotton Mather saying that they were

servants of the Devil who had placed them in America to prevent the godly from occupying the land!

Of course these peculiar beliefs became impressed upon the literature of the day and also found expression on grave-stones in the personification of Death.

Epitaphs did not at first accompany the winged skull, but later they were sometimes found with it. Here is one from a stone in Osterville, Mass., dated 1802. It is simply another form of that given on page 68, and in one way or another often occurs:-

Behold and see as you pass by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now so you must be
Prepare for death and follow me.

Much the same idea is expressed on a stone in the church-yard of Centerville, Mass., and dated 1829. It was erected in memory of two boys, aged thirteen and nineteen, who perished from exposure on a barren island after being shipwrecked there in winter:-

Stop stop young brother sailor
On this stone cast an eye

Although today in youth and health
Tomorrow you may die.

The same idea of warning is conveyed more briefly on a stone found in Rutland in the *Memento Mori*—Remember Death. Fig. 21. This figure is remarkable on account of the scale-like feathers on the wings. The

Fig. 24.

Rutland, Mass. 1787.

hair is elaborately arranged and formed into a kind of crown on top of the head. The face is quite human and evidently an attempt at portraiture. The border of this stone is given in fig. 22. The date is 1777.

Aside from the death heads, emblems were very little employed on stones of early dates in our grave-yards, but we found one in Rutland on which the head of a quaker-ish looking woman is depicted with a dove on either shoulder. The date is 1760; fig. 23.

On another Rutland stone, dated 1787, we find a very primly dressed woman with a rather sanctimonious expression. On eith-side of her is a very stiff looking plant, and on her extreme left is a rather singular figure of what may be intended as another plant with three branches, fig. 24. In perfect keeping with the figures is the epitaph below them:-

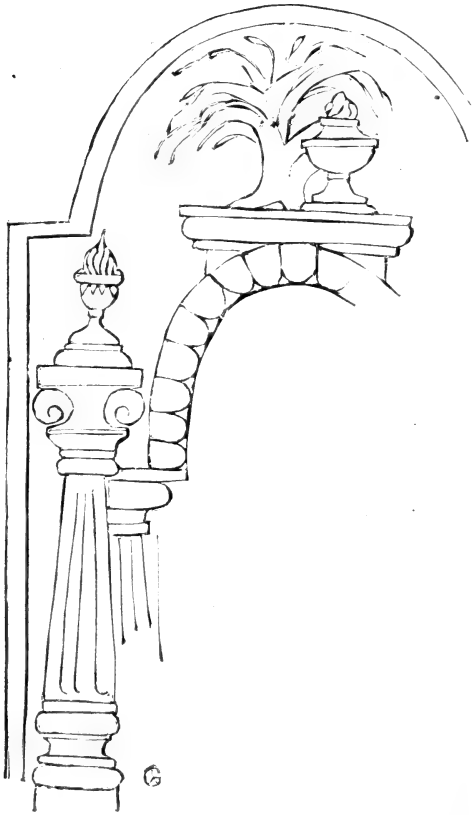
The just behold with sweet delight
The blessed three in one
And strong affection in their sight
On God's incarnate son.

These lines suggest that the three plants each having three branches may be emblematic of the Trinity.

An epitaph on a stone dated 1788, found in Rutland, reads:-

Behold my friend in me you see
An emblem of what you must be.

Fig. 23.



Barre, Mass. 1835.

And on another in the same place, dated 1791, we find:-

Death is a debt to nature due
Which I have paid and so must you.

Both containing the warning given on earlier stones. But it was not until later that any indication of an idea of a future existence occurs in epitaphs. This is one found in Rutland on a stone dated 1799:

Fig. 26.

Sandstone. Barre

Down in the dark and silent bed
The stroke of Death hath laid my head
God's trump shall sound I hope to rise
And meet my Saviour in the skies.

On a stone in Osterville, dated 1802, but much weathered, is inscribed:-

O death thou h-st conquer[d] me
By thy dart I'm slain
But blessed Christ has conquer[d] thee
And I shall rise again.

The weeping willow and funereal urn (the latter with or without a flaming top), began to appear in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The willow was often conventionalized, but was in some cases quite elaborately rendered. The urn, originally intended to contain the ashes of cremated bodies, dates back to ancient Roman times.

On the preceding page, fig. 23, we give an illustration of a rather ornate stone from Barre, Mass, bearing date of 1835, with willow and urn and side urns, all with flames.

Among the interesting epitaphs which we have gathered we have space only for one found on a double stone at Osterville, dated 1807. There were two arching heads and each bore a rising sun. The stone evidently marked the graves of twins one of whom lived six days, the other six months.

In spite of their peculiarity, the lines are pathetic.

We from one gracious God was sent
Unto our parents we was lent
Unto our God we must return
Don't let our tender parents mourn.

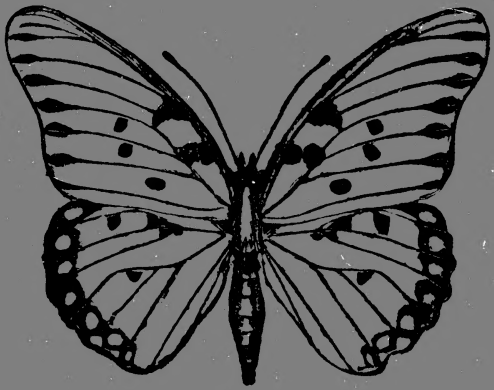
Like the gathering places of the living communities of the dead contain what ap-

Fig. 27.

Sandstone. Barre, Mass.

pear to be mysteries that canont be readily solved. We have recorded one stone found

at Deerfield (see page 58) which marks what seems to be an unknown grave, and now in Barre we find five more singular stones. They are rough slabs of sandstone scattered about the grave-yard, but, while appearing to be quite old, we have no way of telling their exact age as they bear no date, and, in fact, nothing save initials. Two of these mysterious stones are illustrated in figs 26 and 27.



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